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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a lesson plan for a classroom activity, called the "diversity board" which challenges and encourages college students to think seriously about what diversity means and how diversity influences behaviors and communication between people. The paper states that, in less than 20 years, racial and ethnic groups in The United States will outnumber whites and that this "browning of America" will result in a significant change in society, ranging from education to industry politics to values and culture. Since students will face complex and ethnically diverse communication contexts in the near future, it is a responsibility of educators to assist these students to obtain knowledge and develop the needed skills to communicate effectively cross-culturally. The paper gives a list of goals for the "diversity board," including to understand the multicultural diverse backgrounds of people; to decrease the uncertainty and anxiety that often accompanies communication interactions among culturally dissimilar individuals; and to learn that understanding about others in an increasingly diverse world requires effective communication. It also gives detailed instructions for the physical construction and use of the diversity board, including questions and assignments for the students and suggestions for class discussion. (CR)

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The Diversity Board: Encouraging Students to Interact With Others in a Multicultural Society

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The Diversity Board: Encouraging Students to Interact With Others in a Multicultural Society

Introduction

Diversity has become a buzz word over the last few years. Companies, government agencies, educational institutions, and private organizations to name a few examples have talked about the need to recognize what can be gained through the recognition of our planet's vast diversity. However, valuing diversity requires long-term ongoing commitment on the part of citizens. There are no "quick fixes," "magic wands," or easy solutions. Success is proportional to the investment of time and energy given to such an effort (Sue, 1994). This assignment entitled the **Diversity Board** challenges and encourages students to seriously think about what diversity means and how diversity influences behaviors and communication between people.

Rationale

The United States, by its very nature, by its very development, is the essence of diversity. In less than twenty years racial and ethnic groups in the United States will outnumber whites. This "browning of America" will result in a significant change in society ranging from education to industry politics to values and culture (Henry, 1990). It is estimated that a third of the new entrants into the work force between now and the year 2000 will be members from minority groups (Johnston & Packer, 1987). This phenomenon of multicultural pluralism is a offers both tension and new potential for the United States.

However, recent events have jolted our nation's conscience about what it means to cooperate with one another in an increasingly diverse society. The verdict of the O.J. Simpson trial which divided many blacks and whites, riots in Los Angeles after the controversial 1992 acquittal of four police officers in the Rodney King case, debates in Congress and recent Supreme Court decisions on Affirmative Action demonstrate that a dialogue between people from diverse backgrounds and interests is urgently needed. Even the Speech Communication Association has not been immune to controversy when members questioned that the site for this convention should be in San Diego, in a state where affirmative action recruitment was done away with in the University of California system and where Proposition 187 restricts access to services for many immigrants.

In order to respond to these changes in American society academic institutions who are charged with developing educated persons must address the message that internationally and domestically effective intercultural communication is imperative for a society to continue and prosper. Since our students will face complex and ethnically diverse communication contexts in the near future, it is a responsibility of educators to assist these students to obtain knowledge and develop the needed skills to communicate effectively cross-culturally.

Who better than those in the field of Communication to take the helm and lead in discussing such issues of multicultural diversity with their students? Such dialog demands that

communication professionals help plot the course and make contributions in the future to achieve goals of cooperation and understanding in a diverse society.

The Diversity Board activity encourages and challenges students to explore roles of others that they will encounter in a multicultural society. This activity encourages an atmosphere where students can feel safe to observe and/or carry dialogues with individuals who are different from them. By opening up and attempting to understand the perspectives of others in their multicultural world, the students' own perspectives will be enriched and changed.

Objectives or Goals of the Diversity Board

(1) To understand the multicultural diverse backgrounds of people.

(2) To overcome negative expectations when communicating with strangers that are culturally dissimilar in some way.

(3) To decrease the uncertainty and the anxiety that often accompanies communication interactions between culturally dissimilar individuals.

(4) To talk about multicultural diverse experiences by using a first person voice.

(5) To realize the negative effects of prejudice and stereotyping.

(6) To learn that understanding about others in an increasingly diverse world requires effective communication.

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(7) To become aware that competence in intercultural communication requires a combination of knowledge, skills, and motivation.

Directions

Before students begin writing for this assignment they will need to consult the Diversity Board. Although the size of the Diversity Board can vary depending upon need and space restrictions, the dimensions of the Diversity Board used by the authors total approximately 5 foot in width from left to right, and a little over 4 and 1/2 foot in length from top to bottom. Each square in the Diversity consists of a standard 8 and 1/2 inches by 11 inches sheet of paper. The Diversity Board consists of 35 boxes each designating a specific role in our diverse society. Some of the roles in the boxes focus on race (e.g., African-American) while others focus on other human aspects such as ethnicity (e.g., Jewish), religion (e.g., athiest), health status (e.g., HIV status), socioeconomic class (e.g., receiving welfare), and life experience (e.g., war veteran). With the aid of the instructor and/or fellow classmates a student is blindfolded and led to the Diversity Board. The blindfolded student is then instructed to gently toss a small lightweight object (e.g. bean bag, pellet, hockey puck) onto the Diversity Board. The student's role for this assignment is dependent upon the box on the Diversity Board that the lightweight object lands. If by chance the small lightweight object does not land on the Diversity Board or if the object

lands equally on two squares of the Diversity Board the student will take another turn until he or she has landed on a box on the Diversity Board. The time required for this portion of the Diversity Board activity should no more than 10 minutes for a small class; 20 to 30 minutes for larger classes.

Once all students have thrown for their roles on the Diversity Board they will be asked to answer questions (See Appendix A) assuming the role that each student has landed on on the Diversity Board. Examples of these type quesions in the Diversity Board activity include: What are the stereotypes others form of you? How do you deal with such stereotypes in your communication interactions? What sort of prejudice or bias have you experienced in your personal life and in the workplace? How have you coped with such prejudice? When was a time you gave off a good impression when communicating with others who were culturally dissimilar to you? In order for the questions to be answered sufficiently allow students time out of class to research their individual role from the Diversity Board. Encourage students to be as objective as possible in answering the questions from the Diversity Board assignment handout. In order to effectively supply answers students should research his or her individual role. This research can include personal interviews, and consultation of books, periodicals, video, and other resources that enrich a student's understanding of their assigned role.

After students have answered questions assuming the role of the Diversity Board, they are instructed to answer questions from their own perspective about their experiences in conducting the activity. These questions include: What have you learned about this role that you did not know before? How does this new knowledge affect your perception of an individual who has this role in real life? How does this new knowledge affect your interpersonal communication with an individual who fits this role in real life? What were the difficulties and reservations you had (if any) in assuming this role? Students are also asked to supply suggestions on how to improve the Diversity Board Activity.

Before students turn in their Diversity Board assignments allow discussion time for students to share about their experiences with fellow classmates. This can be done as a class discussion. Instructors should allow at least 20 to 30 minutes for discussion. In some cases an entire class period may be reserved for class discussion. The class discussion enables students to share experiences, discover themes, commensurate about some of the difficulties and challenges of communicating in a diverse society, and realize the rewards and new understanding gained by communicating with others who are different from them.

Although students will undoubtedly communicate about the differences between themselves and the roles they write about, focus should not be lost on what is similar. Noticing the similarities between people as well as the differences is

essential to living in a diverse society. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton (1985) urge individuals to seek out similarities because "with a more explicit understanding of what we have in common and the goals we seek to attain together, the differences between us that remain would be less threatening" (p. 287).

Audience Appeal

This activity has been used by the first author in both undergraduate and graduate communication courses on a university campus in the United States. This activity particularly met success in Interpersonal Communication and Intercultural Communication classes. In addition, this activity was first introduced in some high school English classes in Winter 1995-1996. The Diversity Board has the potential to be used for elementary and junior high classes. For these groups, the Diversity Board could serve as a springboard for discussion in social studies classes about diverse groups in United States society. It will be up to instructors to determine the content makeup of the Diversity Board and to include or not include boxes that may not be suitable for a particular age group of children and young adults. Application of the Diversity Board is possible for multicultural communication and diversity awareness training sessions for industry groups and organizations.

Conclusion

The Diversity Board activity encourages students to explore and begin to understand the perspectives of others in a

multicultural society. Not only is the Diversity Board a challenging learning activity, it is also a lot of fun. One student wrote that the Diversity Board activity led her to seek information not only about the role that she landed on but to establish connections with material she was studying in other communications courses. With this in mind the potential for learning and fun through the Diversity Board promises to be exciting.